

Questions and Answers

March 2004

Conservation Innovation Grants

Q. What are Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)?

A. Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) is a voluntary program intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging the Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production. Under CIG, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds are used to award competitive grants to non-Federal governmental or non-governmental organizations, Tribes, or individuals. CIG is authorized under EQIP. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers CIG.

Q. Has a CIG rule been published?

A. CIG is operating under an interim final rule for fiscal year 2004. The interim final rule is available on the NRCS web site at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>. NRCS invites the public to comment on the interim final rule and intends to publish a final rule in the near future.

Q. Who is eligible for CIG?

A. Non-Federal governmental and non-governmental organizations, Indian Tribes, and individuals are eligible to receive a grant.

Q. Who are limited resource producers?

A. A limited resource producer/rancher is: (1) A person with direct or indirect gross farm sales of not more than \$100,000 in each of the previous two years (to be increased starting in fiscal year 2004 to adjust for inflation using the Prices Paid by Farmer Index as compiled by the National Agriculture Statistics Service; and (2) Has a total household income at or below the National poverty level for a family of four, or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years (to be determined annually using Commerce Department data). A limited resource producer/rancher self-determination tool is available on the Web at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/tool_name.asp

Q. Who are beginning farmers and ranchers?

A. The basic criterion for a beginning farmer or rancher is an individual or entity who has operated a farm or a ranch for not more than ten years. Contact your local USDA Service Center for additional information.

Q. What will be the size of individual grants?

A. For fiscal year 2004, the anticipated range of grants is \$75,000 to \$500,000, with a maximum of \$1 million.

Q. How will grant applications be evaluated?

- A. CIG applications will be scored by peer review panels against the Criteria for Proposal Evaluation identified in the CIG Request for Proposals (RFP). The RFP is available on the NRCS website at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>. Scored applications will be forwarded to a Grant Review Board that will certify the panels' rankings and ensure that the evaluations are consistent with program objectives. The Grant Review Board will then forward award recommendations to the NRCS Chief, who will make the final award decisions.

Q. Are applicants required to provide matching funds?

- A. Yes. CIG will pay up to 50 percent of the cost of the proposed project. Up to 50 percent of the applicant's match (i.e., up to 25 percent of the total project cost) may come from in-kind contributions. The applicant's match must consist of non-Federal funds.

Q. What is CIG's connection to EQIP?

- A. There are a number of connections between CIG and EQIP, including:
- CIG was authorized under EQIP in the 2002 Farm Bill, and funds for CIG come from EQIP funding.
 - Grant funds that are provided to a producer or entity to carry out structural, vegetative, or management practices count toward each producer's or entity's EQIP payment limitation.
 - CIG projects must involve EQIP-eligible producers.

Q. What kind of projects are eligible for CIG?

- A. Applications must describe projects that incorporate innovative conservation approaches or technologies, or both used in combination. Applicants should consider the following:
- CIG is not a research program. It is a vehicle to promote the development and adoption of innovative approaches and technologies. CIG will fund projects targeting on-the-ground conservation, including pilot projects and field demonstrations.
 - Proposed projects must conform to the description of innovative conservation projects and activities included in the interim final rule and RFP.
 - Proposed innovative approaches or technologies must address a natural resource conservation concern or concerns. The natural resource concerns for CIG will be identified by the NRCS Chief, and may change each year. The CIG natural resource concerns for fiscal year 2004 are published in the RFP.

Q. Is CIG a nationwide program?

- A. Yes. Applications for CIG are accepted from the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands of the United States, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Q. Who is responsible for the technical assistance on CIG projects?

- A. The grantee is responsible for providing the technical assistance on CIG projects. Technical oversight for grant projects will be provided by a Federal grant representative, who will be designated by NRCS.

Q. Is special consideration provided for limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers, and Tribes?

- A. Yes. Two programmatic exceptions exist for limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers, and Indian Tribes.
- Up to 10 percent of the total funds available for CIG may be set aside for applications from either a beginning or limited resource farmer or rancher, or Tribe, or a community-based organization comprised of or representing these entities.
 - Up to 75 percent of their matching funds may come from in-kind contributions.

Q. How do people apply for CIG?

- A. Application information is available on the NRCS website at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>.

Q. How much money is available for CIG?

- A. The NRCS Chief will determine the CIG funding level on an annual basis. For fiscal year 2004, \$15 million is available for CIG.

For More Information

If you need more information about CIG, please contact Carl Lucero, 5601 Sunnyside Avenue, Mail Stop 5473, Beltsville, MD 20705, phone: (301) 504-2222, fax: (301) 504-2264. E-mails may be sent to: cig@usda.gov. Additional information, including *Federal Register* notices, is available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig>.



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.